



BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
MARINA DIMITRIJEVIC
COUNTY BOARD CHAIRWOMAN

TESTIMONY BY MILWAUKEE COUNTY BOARD CHAIRWOMAN MARINA DIMITRIJEVIC

BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND STATE LICENSING

Thank you Chairman August and members of the Committee.

My name is Marina Dimitrijevic, and I am the Chairwoman of the Milwaukee County Board.

I appreciate the chance to speak with all of you on this bill, which will affect Milwaukee County governance for generations to come.

I am here to testify on behalf of the County Board in opposition to Assembly Bill 85.

It is a new day on the Milwaukee County Board. A new day represented by seven new supervisors – including two elected just last week – and a Board chair who has been in the position for only about a year. A new day represented by a new attitude toward openness and transparency in Milwaukee County government. This new board presents a perfect opportunity to reform ourselves.

We face many issues in Milwaukee County. Poverty. Infant mortality. Joblessness. A crumbling infrastructure. A mental health system in almost constant turmoil. But rather than being allowed to address those issues, the County Board is faced with a fight to maintain the proper representation needed to afford a voice to those we serve.

AB 85 would make drastic changes to the Board without listening to the voices of Milwaukee County residents. It is clear the Assembly is interested in moving this through the Legislature with alarming speed, and all Milwaukee County residents, in fact all statewide residents should be concerned as Wisconsin takes pride in their local representation at the level closest to them.

If enacted, the bill would not only weaken the legislative branch, it would consolidate power into the County Executive's office. This dangerous piece of legislation is an unprecedented threat to the very idea of local control and yes, democracy. As you can understand we are deeply concerned about this bill. It's about Madison imposing its will on a local community without the input of the community itself.

I've heard that we on the Board will never change. But make no mistake. This Board wants to work with Milwaukee County residents to look for ways to reform county government. We ARE working with *local* residents to create realistic reform in County governance, and we would like to work with you, the Legislature. As the Chairwoman of this Board, I am letting you know we *will* enact major changes. But trying to circumvent any of our efforts by passing legislation that forces so-called reform without that local community is no way to run government or implement policies that actually create reform. A bill that mandates changes without local buy-in will never be successful. The opposition to this legislation is driven by a desire among our constituents to be part of this new era in County governance. I had hoped

that a hearing on AB 85 would be held in Milwaukee County, but I see a large contingent of people from the area have come to testify in spite of the time and distance involved. That shows the appetite for change on the local level.

But we have to accomplish reform together. Rep. Sanfelippo and I have had some meaningful discussions lately about how to govern. We just may not agree on it. But I do challenge the Committee to think about how the items in his bill, if they were to apply to the Legislature, would hinder your ability to represent your constituents.

As part of our reform efforts, we've initiated "OUR" Milwaukee County listening sessions to determine what residents want from County government. The overwhelming response of hundreds of people at our sessions is that if there is to be any change, it should be made locally.

This initiative creates a dialogue for everyone who wants to be represented in the discussion on how to reform county government. Because the answers for county-wide government reform will not come from a single person or a small group. They won't come from a single branch of government. They certainly won't come from Madison. They will come from the people whose lives are affected by county government each and every day, the people of Milwaukee County.

The word "OUR" of Our Milwaukee stands for "Outreach for Unified Reform." The word outreach means we're reaching out to everyone with a stake in county government, the word unified means we're all working toward a common goal, and the word reform means that our common ground is the most efficient delivery of services and the most effective use of our shared county resources.

The fact is, the County Board matters, and our constituents care deeply about it. The number of people in this room testifies to the passion Milwaukee County residents feel about County governance. During several "OUR Milwaukee County" sessions in which hundreds have testified, the vast majority do not want to see this bill passed. They do not want to see change imposed on a local government by the state. And they want to be part of the reform process that is taking place on County governance, **LOCALLY**.

The County touches their lives every day. Whether they're travelling county highways, flying out of Mitchell International or Timmerman, visiting the Milwaukee County Zoo, our parks, or even getting a marriage license, Milwaukee County is part of the lives of thousands of people on a daily basis.

Let me list just a few of the operations the Board provides policy direction to. There is our Transit system, which is key to getting people to their jobs and the many recreational activities offered in Milwaukee County. There is our world-class Parks system, which includes hundreds of acres of green space and professional caliber golf courses.

There is the mental health system, which provides care to chronically mentally ill patients and is especially critical to their families who need assistance.

We agree the Board should not manage the day-to-day operations of these departments. But the Board does provide the public access and accountability to these services. This bill weakens the Legislative branch, stifles the people's voice in county government, and consolidates power in the County Executive's office.

For example, the legislation includes what has been called a protective clause for the County Executive's office. While the Legislative branch's budget is being slashed, the County Executive's

budget is protected and may not be reduced. In addition, as addressed by a Legislative Council memo, the bill strips away management and supervisory responsibilities from the department heads. I don't know what administrators in the private sector would want to work under conditions where they have no authority over those who work for them. It also creates an authoritarian central power that could make county employees less productive and fear the chain of command.

The bill gives the County Executive a role in calling a meeting of the Board. Which other executive in state or local government has that ability?

Meanwhile, the bill will eliminate about 70 percent of Board staff, ensuring the Board has no staff to provide as counsel and allowing the county executive to be the bearer of all information including but not limited to drafting legislation.

The claim by supporters of this bill is that the measure will help cut costs brings up two issues: First, if the measure is designed to cut costs, why cut from only one department that makes up only .5 percent of the County budget?

Second, the bill singles out Milwaukee County by tying supervisors' salaries to the median household income of the County, or about \$24,000. No other municipality or county in the state has its legislative branch salary tied to median county income. Does this mean that elected officials in more wealthy communities should be compensated more?

Additionally, it imposes a spending cap of .4 percent of the County tax levy on Board expenses. Again, in which other county or municipality in Wisconsin has the Legislature imposed a cap on spending by the legislative branch? If this were applied to Waukesha County the board would have to cut their budget by 60 percent.

Proponents of this bill say it puts Milwaukee County in line with the other 71 counties in the state. But in fact, it takes Milwaukee County out of line with the rest of the state.

This isn't about personalities or those currently occupying the respective offices. This isn't a partisan issue. This is about the future of Milwaukee County residents and their ability to govern themselves regardless of who the players are. Local reform is possible – we are in the process of making it on the local level – but it needs to be thoughtful, not arbitrary, and not imposed by the state.

A recent poll by Marquette University's Charles Franklin indicates a 48-48 split between those who want a full-time and those who want a part-time County Board. That is not a call for state imposition of a state mandate. That is a call for more local decision-making.

How can the state impose its own "reform" work when the community is not asking for it and all stakeholders are not working on it together? This indicates there should be open and honest dialogue on a local level.

Supporters of this bill, specifically Rep. Sanfelippo, say this bill is aimed at fixing what they view as "dysfunction" on the Board. What exactly is meant by dysfunction? The democratic process is always a bit messy, as you know. Disagreements between elected officials and debate on issues is a part of the legislative process. It is incumbent on those in office to try and find a way to work together. If the people don't like it, they have elections to work it out.

The County is working well. Our parks are in great shape. The County has an AA+ bond rating. We have a surplus. Our transit system, which has suffered substantial funding cuts by the state, is still doing its best to get people to their jobs. And through Board action an agreement was made between the War Memorial and the Milwaukee Art Museum to commit \$15 million in repairs and improvements to the facilities and grounds.

That's not dysfunction; that's effective government.

The Board has made progress toward reform. It has downsized itself from 25 to 19 to 18 in recent years, more than 25 percent, bringing the size of the Milwaukee County Board below the state average.

This bill, quite simply, is a move to consolidate power into the County Executive's office.

To those who say the board has had ten years to reform itself, I say this: The reforms we will propose ourselves are real and will continue. They will be generated locally and will be put in place. This means that not only is the bill a dangerous impingement on local government, it is a moot point.

This is, for all intents and purposes, a new board with a new way of doing things. We believe in transparency and open government.

It is a new day at the Milwaukee County board. New leadership. New members. And a new attitude. Our state statutes dictate that the counties shall have home rule in regard to self-governing.

This is about nothing less than self-government. I ask you to vote against AB 85. By doing so you are not opposing reform. A vote against this bill is a vote for *local* reform.

There is no best practice and one way to reform. There is no model. The best practice is to let local governments self-govern.

That's what every other county in the state does.

Thank you.